*The Other Crowd (August 2003)*

> Outside, in the dark, the street is body-tall,
>
> flowered with faces intent on the scarecrow thing
> that shouts to thousands the echoing
> of their own wishes.) The Orator has risen! (15- 18)

We might be inclined to interpret the dedication to Camillien Houde, in A.M. Klein's "Political Meeting," as a genuine gesture of Klein's respect for Houde's oratorical skills, but it may also be a gesture of sympathy for a man ensnared. For within the bracketed lines is content which calls into question the orator's belief that he "has them" (11), that he commands "the" "crowd" (9). While the orator has "[an]other voice" (33), within these lines is another crowd, a very different crowd, seemingly, from the one "[with]in the hall" (14). We meet a "street" crowd, not a kowed "country" (20) crowd. We find this crowd, not caught "in snares" (9), but "intent" on the speaker, intending to use him as a "thing," as a tool, to service its own desires.

If the bracketed material was not induded in the poem there would be little in it that casts doubt on the orator's dominion over his audience. The poem would relate how an orator, "kith and kin" (29) with his folksy crowd, moves his gullible, guidable audience to thoughts of race war. When he moves from "sling[ing] slang" and "wink[ing] folklore" (36) to "[c]almly" "speak[ing] of war" (38), the orator shows that from the beginning of his oration he had had a war-plan in mind. He is a plotting and masterful manipulator, and his audience is manageable, malleable stuff: we learn from the poem's opening lines that "they [a]wait" (2) in "folding seats" "on [a] [. . .] school platform" (1), the "chairman's" arrival and "praise" (2). However, Klein's indusion of the bracketed lines ensures some uncertainty exists as to who really was in control of whom at this political meeting.

The brackets help suggest that whatever the nature of the material they endose, it does not quite fit with the rest of the text. (And, indeed, in this poem, it doesn't.) We might normally construe bracketed material—optional reading, but for two reasons we might not do so here: one, we were told that the chairman's charm depends on him being "full of asides and wit" (12); and two, we know that the poem is *about* transformations and elevations, induding the "rise" of the "Orator!"

Our first reaction to learning of the "thousands" "[o]utside" is likely to assume that they are an extension of the crowd found within the hall. We might assume that these thousands serve, by suddenly suggesting the expansive breadth of the orator's appeal, to cinch the orator's transformation from ordinary "chairman" to awesome "Orator" at the end of line 18. But the text works against our likely instinctive desire to conflate the two crowds together. Because one is "[o]utside," the other inside, because one is "in the dark," the other bathed in "yellow [. . .] light" (7), because one is associated with "streets," and the other with "school platforms," the two crowds—hardly "kith and kin"—cannot easily be merged. Any crowd found "[with]in the dark" would be menacing—a street crowd, particularly so. And though the "inside" crowd ravaged a "ritual bird" (9), they do little but slavishly "[w]orship and love" (19) their "country unde" (20). This "street" crowd, on the other hand, at a distance from the orator—and harder to imagine as as intimately involved with his "shouts" as the crowd within the hall is with his "asides"—seems more malevolent than malleable, more studious than servile, and more a potential heavy counter-weight to his influence than an easily "pin[ned]" (26) lightweight "oppon[ent] (26).

"[T]he street is body-tall"; it is a weight which might as easily overwhelm as enhance the orator/prophet's "building" (13) oratorical mass. When we discover the semantic and rhythmic "echoing" of the "str*ee*t" crowds' "*flowered* faces" in the "country unde's" "sun*flow*er s*ee*ds" (26), our sense that both harmony and dissonance exists in the relationship between the orator and this crowd is enhanced. We suspect that it is what will be made of *this* crowd which matters, but we question what the orator can make of it. We cannot be certain whether the street's "flowered faces" are more likely to blossom or wilt in the presence of a repellent "scarecrow thing." Characterized as composed of "flowered faces," as opposed to say, crowed countenances, this crowd still attends to the scarecrow thing with some of the same studious "intent" that surely facilitated the orator's masterful manipulation of those within the hall. So while the orator has his "tricks" (21), the street crowd might be eyeing its puppet: how certain can we be that someone who services the desires of others, who "echo[es] / [. . .] [their] own wishes" is in any sense, or at any time, their master?

The "body-odour of race" (39) is what the orator summons at the end of the poem, not from those who "wait[ed]" in the hall but from those outside who comprise "[t]he whole street" (37). In retrospect, the repetition of "ou's" in the bracketed lines ("*Ou*tside," "sh*ou*ts," "th*ou*sands") identify this temporary confine as

the summoning circle of the poem's penultimate visitation: the invisible od*our*. No surprise, however, is the summoning of body odour—the inevitable by-product of body heat—from this corporeal street mass. No real "trick" (21), either. And so while there is no question left at the end of the poem as to whether the orator's rhetoric was inflammatory, we are left uncertain as to what transpired. Did the orator use the crowd? If so, which crowd? If the crowd inside the hall was directed towards thoughts of war, is it possible that the street crowd, at least, used the "seed peddler" to bring to the surface their own deeply seeded racist thoughts?

Perhaps in "Political Meeting" Klein was bringing to the surface a "grim" (38) possible truth many of us still hesitate to consider. No doubt, even with the comparative ambiguity of the nature of the flowered/street crowd's relationship to the orator, the potency of the orator's power is conveyed in the poem. Almost certainly, the poem was born out of a modernist's desire for, and fears of, the arrival of central leaders who might unite a fractured society together. But perhaps contained in its "shadow[s]" (38) is the terrifying realization that the Houdes and Hitlers of the world arise from the wishes of legions of "willing executioners" (Goldhagen).

## Works Cited

Goldhagen, Daniel. *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust*. New York: Knopf, 1996. Print.

Klein, A. M. "Political Meeting." *15 Canadian Poets × 3*. Ed. Gary Geddes. Don Mills: Oxford UP, 2001. 41-42. Print.